Volume 8, Number 4 The Coalition of Essential Schools March 1992

HORACE

Essential Schools and State Systems: How Is the Climate Changing?

As schools change, states can either help or hinder their efforts. In California and New Mexico, New York and Pennsylvania, far-sighted policy makers are setting up structures that encourage bold steps in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

BY KATHLEEN CUSHMAN

SOONER OR LATER, when schools begin to change in the fundamental ways advocated by the Coalition of Essential Schools, they will run up against state educational policies and regulations. Maybe a teacher wants to center a U.S. history course around a theme like immigration—but the state dictates what textbooks she must cover. Or a principal might want a special education teacher to be working with the regular program too, so teachers will have no more than 80 students yearly to coach in mixed-ability groups—but the fine print rules against it. Or because state achievement exams emphasize coverage over depth, teachers may fear leaving their textbook course outlines.

The state is not a monolith, of course, but a system of people doing their jobs; and depending on what those people's outlooks are, they can dramatically alter the climate in which school change efforts take place. As the Essential School effort snowballs across the country, crucial questions arise as to how that climate affects the Coalition's struggle for meaningful school reform, and how statewide strategies can help rather than hinder Essential schools in that task.

Most CES work involving state systems takes place through Re:Learning, a collaborative effort of the Coalition and the Education Commission of the States that encourages everyone "from schoolhouse to statehouse" to align their goals, policies, and funding in support of Essential School ideas. Eight states—Delaware, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Illinois, Indiana, Arkansas, Colorado, and New Mexico—have so far signed on with Re:Learning, and several more are close to doing so. In a few other states, such as California and New York, the Coalition works through large regional networks of schools, but because these efforts depend on local coordinators whose private funding is less assured, CES now largely limits new membership to states that have joined Re:Learning.

In any case, the Coalition has recognized that true Essential School change ultimately depends on the state's active participation. But each state's relation to its CES member schools reflects its own politics, personalities, and priorities; and as individual as each situation are the key questions and solutions a state will frame.

When a state signs on to Re:Learning, some worry, will school reform become too vulnerable to the vagaries of changing administrations? If for political reasons a state will not join Re:Learning, can Essential School ideas permeate the establishment anyway, changing the educational climate of a state in other, subtler ways? In either case, is it better to concentrate on building up a few strong schools as models of Essential School philosophy, or to spread the effort among more schools, broadening the political base

but risking attempts that may turn out to be shallow and unpersuasive?

Looking at how Essential schools fare in states where the climate for change is warm, one confronts many of these dilemmas in all their complexity. New Mexico, for example, which is a Re:Learning state, has focused state efforts on moving as quickly and broadly as possible to introduce Essential School ideas from kindergarten through the college years. The gargantuan California educational system has not joined Re:Learning, but Essential School principles are reflected in the state's broad efforts to shift fundamental visions of schooling, and in its grant programs for schools moving boldly toward reform. Such efforts to nurture change are as different as a garden hose and an intravenous tube, but a visit to these two states points up advantages to each.

Achieving systemic change necessarily means altering policies, codes, and regulations; and across the country Essential School advocates are watching with keen interest as states like these begin to imbed many of CES's Nine Common Principles in more enduring forms. California's radically revised curriculum frameworks and its experiments with alternative assessment methods, for example, have much affinity with Essential School ideas. New Mexico has revised certification requirements to encourage teacher-generalists, and given the state board sweeping authority to waive other rules for experimental schools. And Pennsylvania, a Re:Learning state, has made dramatic changes in the rules governing its curriculum.

Changing a State's Regulations: How Pennsylvania Has Done It

Whether they belong to Re:Learning or not, Pennsylvania schools this year received the first unambiguous message that new principles now underlie what the state expects from a public education. The State Board of Education circulated in September a 100-page document that redefines state curriculum and assessment regulations; after extensive public discussion and revision, it will take effect.

Gone are the rules dictating how many minutes must be spent each year in how many subjects to accumulate so many credits; gone are the narrow distinctions between vocational and academic tracks; gone is the focus on setting minimum standards and diagnosing individual student deficiencies through standardized tests. In their place is a thorough and deep articulation of "higher order learning outcomes" that sets high expectations for what students should know and be able to do. Assessment, in turn, will test the strengths and weaknesses of school programs in meeting the expected outcomes, allowing local assessment to determine individual student proficiency.

The state's new goals revolve around specific "learning outcomes" that would teach students to think critically, develop a sense of self-worth, learn independently and collaboratively, adapt to change, and make ethical judgments. These habits of mind show up in specific recommendations for cross-disciplinary curriculum areas ranging from communications to science and technology, the arts and humanities, citizenship, and career education.

The changes reflect an intensive two years of effort including many public meetings aimed at involving parents, educators, business leaders, and the community. The language of the new regulations shows marked Essential School influence; key CES and ECS staff met with the state board, and Re:Learning people attended every public meeting to represent the Coalition's point of view. Still, the new ideas were no shoo-in. Begun under Democratic Governor Robert Casey in 1988, Re:Learning is the state's primary school reform initiative but not its only one.

"The message is clear to Pennsylvania schools, Re:Learning schools or not," says Jean di Sabatino, the state's Re:Learning coordinator. "Everyone is going to have to change to come in line with the state guidelines. Somehow it makes the changes seem less radical, which is good for resistant schools."

Indeed, resistance to Essential School ideas is as present in Pennsylvania as anywhere. "We had 250 parents show up last week at a meeting in Lancaster, worried about eliminating tracking if an Essential School program was extended in one school," says Patricia Smith, a CES Senior Associate who serves as liaison to the Pennsylvania effort. And teacher unions have voiced fears that eliminating course requirements could encourage schools in fiscal trouble to cut back on programs.

"This state is a good barometer for school change nationwide," Pat Smith observes. "Most of its schools already consider themselves good, though they are not unreceptive to reform. But because their problems are not desperate they tend to be somewhat conservative about change." The state's mix of rural and urban districts and its political balance of power, agrees the state board's Bob Fier, makes it "about as close to mainstream America as I've seen."

The new curriculum regulations imply that teachers will be differently prepared, able to cross disciplinary lines and comfortable with the role of coach as students learn in more active ways. Indeed, the next big step for Pennsylvania's board is revising its teacher certification regulations, and it intends to use the same process over the next year in doing so. "The most productive route will be to work with higher education people to change teacher preparation," says Fier. The state's university system is already closely allied with the Re:Learning effort, serving as close partners to Re:Learning schools and placing student teachers there as "junior colleagues" in the change effort.

Schools will play out the new regulations in their own ways, Bob Fier predicts, but now that their concepts are embedded in the state code, recognizable Essential School patterns are likely to show up fairly consistently in the next three to five years. "The political reality is that public schools don't have much time to prove they're going to do things differently," he says. "We've had to move very swiftly for the kind of changes we're talking about."

How has all this come about in less than a decade? How can such reforms be expected to fare in the next few years? Some answers may emerge from a close look at two states' journeys toward change, and at how Essential schools figure in their plans for the future.

California Embraces Change

When school reform became a hot issue in 1983 in California, the nation sat up and took notice. California claims one in seven of the nation's public school students—Los Angeles County alone has as many students as all of New England—and with its burgeoning immigrant population and a deep fiscal crisis, the state exemplifies all the toughest problems facing U.S. educators. The 1983 School Reform Act, passed in response to public discontent as schools came under national fire, called for tougher standards, more accountability, and sweeping efficiencies in school management. But old paradigms of schooling—a "back-to-basics" attitude that did not fundamentally question how material was best taught and learned—still underlay its thinking.

Gradually, though, state initiatives launched under the Reform Act's auspices began to push against and test those old assumptions. The new California curriculum frameworks became known nationwide for reflecting state-of-the-art thinking on math, science, and writing across the curriculum. A state-sponsored network of "Subject Matter Projects" involved teachers in summer study groups to develop and spread such ideas. Senate Bill 1882 provided an infusion of money for staff development; the California State Leadership Academy encouraged administrators to become instructional leaders in these new efforts. A program called Every Student Succeeds (ESS) funneled funds to schools trying new ways to integrate students at risk of failure back into their core curricular programs; and another provided health and social services to kids in need. A task force report called "Caught in the Middle" suggested new visions of middle schools' purpose and means. And the Business Roundtable, an association of the state's top 75 private employers, lent its weight and support to selected change efforts.

In this new atmosphere, the Coalition of Essential Schools became an influential ally to those who saw improving curriculum and pedagogy as the heart of school reform. Because it was not formally connected with the state bureaucracy, some observers say, the Coalition could serve as a "critical friend" to schools and state people alike. From its place as a nationally known outsider, it could both provoke and enable, challenge and support the growing statewide conversation about learning, and point out the implications for schools of what the state was doing.

As an outsider to California's system, the Coalition could be a "critical friend" to schools and state people alike.

"We were outside the system, so we could be an advocate at every level," says Steve Jubb, who now coordinates the Northern California Essential School effort. "We weren't just a friend to Mr. Teacher, or a friend to Mary in the education office. And no one was paying for our services, so we could be disinterested—we weren't seen as trying to protect our jobs."

The formal Essential School effort in California, however, stayed in the planning stages until the late 1980s, when the Coalition named two regional coordinators—Maggie Szabo in the San Francisco Bay area and David Marsh, a University of Southern California professor, in the Los Angeles area. They began working with interested schools, and offered workshops bringing in people from Essential schools in other states. About that same time Judy Codding, who had led two early Essential school efforts in Westchester County, New York, took over in 1988 as head of Pasadena High School and Coalition ideas found their first large-scale arena in California. "We then had a public school to bear local witness to our ideas," Theodore Sizer says.

How the Ideas Spread

Today, the Coalition in Southern California has its own network of experienced Essential School people in active contact with each other as "critical friends" and coaches. Maggie Szabo has moved into a state position directing an ambitious program of grants for school restructuring under Senate Bill 1274—the guidelines for which, signed by Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, deeply reflect the Coalition's Nine Common Principles. Along with Szabo, David Marsh and Judy Codding serve on the state's new Task Force on High Schools, in whose far-reaching final report Essential School ideas will figure prominently. Coalition thinking was very influential in revising the training materials that 1,500 school administrators have worked with in the California State Leadership

HORACE

HORACE is published five times yearly at Brown University by the Coalition of Essential Schools, Brown University, Box 1969, Providence, RI 02912. Subscription is free.

Editor:
Kathleen Cushman
Managing Editor:
Susan Fisher

Academy. Schools are working with state-led projects on new assessment practices, and the California Assessment Program (CAP) has begun to introduce new performance-oriented measures into its testing program.

California gives grants to key schools that plan bold changes, hoping they will serve as models for all.

And all eyes are riveted on the changes under way at Pasadena High School, a large urban school staggering under the kinds of problems that face the entire state—dropouts, drugs, the weight of a dead curriculum with no relation to a multicultural population approaching the 21st century. In the last few years Pasadena's faculty has reorganized itself into five houses, begun to cross disciplinary lines and strip the curriculum of non-essentials, and wrestled budgets to put close knowledge of students by teachers at the top of its priority list. Students now show up regularly and their grades are rising, Codding's figures show, though she bears battle scars— from a walkout strike by students and teachers when she moved inter-scholastic athletics out of the formal school day, for example.

Pasadena typifies the "showcase school" strategy of California's school reform movement in general and of Essential School reform here in particular. So does Santa Monica's Lincoln Middle School, a flourishing Essential school where Ilene Straus was named the state's Principal of the Year by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. In nearby Orange County, Judy Cunningham and Rancho San Joaquin Middle School have also won a wide reputation for Essential School practices. To provide support and coaching for teachers within these and nearby schools, the Coalition has clustered a number of its National Re:Learning Faculty members in each, and all have grown used to troops of visitors flocking through their halls.

Some of these model schools, but not all, have benefited by special state grants, which augment the average $4,100-per-pupil expenditure that ranks California among the lowest in the nation in per-pupil spending. The situation vividly illustrates California's strategy of inspiring change in the many by paying for change in the few. Last year, under Senate Bill 1274, 212 schools received planning grants to help them envision their restructuring. This year, if the legislature votes funds for it, the state will select a new round of schools—not necessarily the same ones, or even as many—to receive additional money for the next five years as "demonstration schools."

In choosing its grant recipients, the state looks for a spread across achievement records and socio-economic levels; some good schools with ambitious programs resent the system because it leaves them dependent on local tax overrides or business partnerships. On the positive side, several of the state's initiatives (such as professional development and restructuring grants) dovetail neatly around new visions of teaching and learning. And the state's restructuring goals—"a thinking-centered, meaning-centered curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, combined with dramatically bold and effective school and district structures and practices"—read like a Re:Learning manifesto for change.

Without Re:Learning to organize Essential School change in California, the Coalition has relied on an extraordinary network of regional contact people paid by private foundations, universities, and even county or district systems. (The San Francisco Foundation pays for virtually all the Northern California effort; and the Ahmanson, ARCO, Drown, and Hearst foundations are major contributors in the south.)

It even seems possible that state restructuring efforts may intertwine with Coalition efforts to such an extent that the practical objectives of Re:Learning could be achieved without a formal commitment. For example, a "lead person" in each of California's ten main geographical regions, paid by the state restructuring office, provides encouragement and support for schools applying for grants. And because the restructuring guidelines mesh so closely with Essential School ideas, Northern California Coalition coordinator Steve Jubb is besieged by schools asking him for help. Jubb is stretched so thin that he wants his job to be split into several new positions, perhaps correlating with the regions of the county school system.

Without Re:Learning's structure, the state relies on a network of regional contact people paid by foundations, universities, or districts.

A solid base of support at the University of Southern California and a core group of National Re:Learning Faculty members provide a structure for efforts in the south. The CES Southern California coordinator, David Marsh, is a professor of education at USC, for example. One day a week the state pays him to go to Pasadena High to be their "school coach." Two of his doctoral students have key positions with reform efforts in local school districts. Another USC doctoral student, Ilene Straus, is a Thomson Fellow on the Coalition's National Re:Learning Faculty, as is Judy Cunningham, principal at Rancho San Joaquin, where teachers Steve Cantrell, Michele Rosenblum, Brad Hughes, and Erin VanDeventer are National Faculty members as well. Steve Poynter, a teacher at Pasadena, is a National Faculty Member and a USC student. Michael Goldman

comes in for a week every month from his half-time post with New Mexico's Re:Learning, to work in the L.A. region. "That's a lot of influence, a lot of voices to spread the word," Marsh says.

California's guidelines for restructuring show a deep affinity with Essential School ideas.

Although California's new state policies are well focused by Essential School standards, Marsh acknowledges, the state's success is still moderate, its performance bad, and its funding terrible. Still, he says, for a state in a disastrous educational and financial situation, things look pretty good to him. "If you can get four big districts to have a small set of transformed schools," he argues, "you'll be moving very fast." The danger, he warns, is "devising 100 programs to address 100 problems," and he credits Maggie Szabo in the restructuring office with writing "brilliant guidelines" with which schools can identify their central problems. "I'd rather deal with these dilemmas," Marsh says emphatically, "than let every school do it on their own."

Re:Learning in New Mexico

School reform was also launched in New Mexico in 1983 with a "back-to-basics" school reform act rooted in more requirements, more regulations, an old-style industrial model of schools made more efficient. By 1988, when an influential group of five well-placed educators made the trip to Milton, Massachusetts for a groundbreaking Coalition summer workshop, the state was chafing against what it viewed as top-down change and was ripe for more substantive, teacher-driven classroom reforms.

Now, barely three years after New Mexico joined Re:Learning, the state is up to its ears in Essential School ideas, running an intensive effort to reorient its 88 school districts from kindergarten through post-secondary levels. The state presents an astonishing picture of determination and speed, a mix made possible, at least in part, by the personalities and placement of the initial five people whose interest in Essential Schooling got the whole thing started on virtually no funds except a grant from Panasonic and the administrative support of Eastern New Mexico University.

New Mexico is a huge state geographically, the fourth largest in the nation; but unlike its sprawling cousin, California, its population is small and its educational establishment is close-knit. "Superintendents and principals here tend to know what each other are doing," says Jeanne Knight, the state's Associate Superintendent and head of the cadre charged with developing and articulating Re:Learning's goals. That fact helped when Knight attended the 1988 Milton Coalition workshop, accompanied by Marlis Mann, aide to then Governor Garrey Carruthers; the late Eddie Ortiz, then the influential superintendent of Santa Fe's school district; Judy Duval, a teacher now with Re:Learning's New Mexico offices; and Hayes Lewis, the superintendent of the Zuni schools, one of two Native American school districts in the country.

A Tribe Transforms Its Schools: The Zuni Story

The public schools of Zuni, New Mexico provide a striking example of Essential School principles adapted to a particular community's needs and vision. When he first launched his native Zuni tribe on school change ten years ago, superintendent Hayes Lewis broke with a larger district to carve out an autonomous K-12 district for this reservation of 9,200. In a series of bold moves including withdrawing from the state accreditation system, he and his curriculum director, Kirby Gchachu, asked the entire tribal community to help decide what they wanted for their children.

"We had the state's highest dropout rate, its lowest achievement, poor attendance, and low parental involvement," Lewis says. "The community asked for a high-quality academic program with learning opportunities in and out of the buildings; power over making decisions and solving our problems; and an emphasis on Zuni culture, history, and language throughout the curriculum."

Today students at Zuni's alternative Twin Buttes High School are preparing for an oral and written presentation answering a key question that faces their tribe: how to spend the Zuni Land Reclamation money the tribe has just received. In a cross-disciplinary unit that incorporates government and law, land use, economics, history, math and science, and research, writing, and speaking skills, they will reflect on questions that have real and immediate meaning to the entire community.

Both Twin Buttes and the larger Zuni High School schedule four long blocks into each school day, and teachers have grown accustomed to acting as generalists in several subject areas. The district is in a pilot assessment project with the state, developing new ways to document student performance. And Lewis speaks soberly of the need to keep up a steady evaluation of each new move to avoid stagnation in the process.

For the Zuni district, New Mexico's Re:Learning effort came at just the right time, Lewis observes, and the process for joining it closely mirrored the traditional tribal methods of consensus decision-making. "There's less bureaucracy with Re:Learning than with a lot of projects," he says. "This project says, 'You guys are calling the shots.' What's so *right* about it is that it's at the building level." But the district must now act swiftly and boldly, he says: "The community is behind us, the board is behind us, and the administrators are in place. Now is our time to act; it may be our only chance."

The five represented such an inclusive spread of school people, and their personal influence was so marked in the state, that Essential School ideas won widespread acceptance throughout the system early on. All agree that a powerful early spokesman for the effort was Governor Carruthers, a change-minded Republican who chaired the Education Commission of the States; and the help of Eastern New Mexico University was also indispensable. But the state's swift commitment to Re:Learning has now handily survived a change of administration under Democratic Governor Bruce King, the death of the charismatic Ortiz, opposition by right-wing elements, and yearly funding decisions by a legislature with unusually direct control over the state's school budget.

Part of that political stability can be credited to an extraordinary effort

New Mexico has spread the idea of "student as worker" statewide, from kindergarten through college.

to disseminate the Essential School idea of "student as worker," at the very least, widely throughout the state, from kindergarten through college and teacher education programs. Though most schools are only in the earliest stages of exploring what that might mean in action, Essential School vocabulary is everywhere; thousands of teachers, parents, administrators, and school organizations have already participated in Re:Learning activities and awareness sessions.

New Mexico Re:Learning goes about its mission from an unused elementary school in Santa Fe, its tiny staff headed by Pedro Atencio, a widely admired, soft-spoken, intense former principal of Santa Fe's Sweeney Elementary School, committed to involving teachers, parents, board members, and administrators as widely as possible. To do that he relies heavily on the Coalition's Trek concept, a year-long framework that helps schools envision and carry out change. This year some 250 school people who are farther along in the process served as "Essential Friends" to partner schools, "trekking them" through the phases of change. New Mexico's universities are a key part of this effort; they grant graduate credit to teachers for work on Trek activities, and they help sponsor task forces where networks of teachers share expertise in particular subject areas.

With Judy Duval and Michael Goldman (a former teacher at New York City's Central Park East Secondary School), Atencio has used the Trek strategy to decentralize the state's effort, spreading $619,000 in Re:Learning funds this year among some 50 schools in five large geographical regions, at an average of around $10,000 per school. Next year Re:Learning is asking for $1.5 million more, as schools now in the exploratory and design stages begin to carry out their plans. A matching grant from Southwestern Bell supplements state funding. And New Mexico is waiting hopefully for word on a five-year National Science Foundation grant that would put $2 million more yearly toward efforts to change curriculum and instruction in ways closely compatible with Essential School ideas.

Atencio and his staff acknowledge that their ambitious strategy means a large number of New Mexico schools are in the earliest phases of change, still coming to terms with the failings of the traditional system and exploring new options. But they point out that as regional support is formalized and structures of peer support (like the Trek) built up, schools should move more quickly

NY's Essential Schools: Partners with the State

In New York, a dramatic shift in the state's education policy statement has directly involved Essential schools as key exemplars of school change. In fall 1991, as part of their ambitious "New Compact for Learning" reform agenda, the state's Regents adopted a "Partnership Schools Program" aimed at getting schools to try bold new alternatives to traditional schooling. The first group of schools named to the program consisted entirely of members of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

"This puts us squarely in the center of the state's reform movement," says the CES regional coordinator for New York, Joan Carney. "This program not only gives public recognition to the New York Essential schools that have come so far; it will also allow their work to proceed and go deeper." Carney and a number of New York's Essential school leaders met often with Education Commissioner Thomas Sobol and State Education Department people over the past several years as they drafted the New Compact for Learning.

Each school in the partnership will work with a state liaison person to obtain waivers from state policies and practices, such as curriculum mandates, that have made restructuring difficult. "Even more important," says Carney, "we'll be working toward defining new learning outcomes and developing alternative assessment practices, perhaps including waivers from the state's Regents exam requirements."

For their part, New York's Essential schools will provide key guidance to State Education Department people, as well as a vision of how future schools might look to those that follow them in the Partnership Program. Coalition school people from the region will also sit on the state's oversight committee for the new program.

"This is a loud and clear message from the state to those schools that might have regarded Essential School ideas as somehow aberrant," says Carney. "The state has given us its imprimatur; we are in the mainstream now."

schools will have to start with a vision that creates a need for site-based management. The legislators will catch up.")

"Our real obstacle," Jeanne Knight says, "is not so much state policies. It is in our own heads—the traditional passive learning model that so many people take for granted. Everybody wants to be part of Re:Learning, partly because it carries money for schools. But few realize how hard it is to really do it. They get caught into thinking that if they just do cooperative learning, they're fine."

Re:Learning can provide a statewide *form* for school restructuring, Knight argues, but the substance must grow from a deeper under standing of Essential School principles. It's risky, Knight says, to rely primarily on classroom teachers relatively inexperienced in their own school's transformation to prod and coach other schools as they go through the same process. (It is not unusual in New Mexico for someone to begin the Trek process during one school year and lead a Trek workshop the next.) "We need those teachers in their own classrooms, improving substance there," Knight says. "I'd like to see ten or twelve of the state board's staff people deeply trained to serve that critical friend function instead." And, although the state is busy redefining school leadership to include more than just the principal, Knight wants to focus on one person in each district—whether a coordinator, a principal, or a superintendent—who will be thoroughly coached by Essential School people in addition.

• • •

What can be drawn from a look at how these states have approached Essential School change system-wide? No two states are alike in makeup or politics, after all, and every such difference will dictate different routes to change. What states that are making progress seem to have in common, though, is both an elected leadership that endorses change and strong independent leaders in the educational establishment who can develop long-ranging new policies and put them into place.

Aside from that, states can help by sending strong signals to schools as to the route they want them to take, as New Mexico has done. They can give money and technical assistance to local schools in pursuing that vision, as New Mexico's Re:Learning funds and California's SB 1274 have achieved. They can set positive directions in curriculum, as California and Pennsylvania demonstrate, and follow that through with authentic assessment strategies, as is slowly happening in California and New Mexico. They can provide new visions—not precise blueprints, but reports like California's "Caught in the Middle"—on how schools might look in the future. They can revise their credentialing and preparation requirements for teachers, involving university schools of education as all three of these states are doing.

These are neither "top-down" nor "bottom-up" efforts, in the old language of political change. Rather, they are powerful collaborations across all levels. They remind us that if it is to work, people *throughout* a state system must engage with school change—making it happen in their classrooms, their offices, and their chambers; making it matter to all the key stakeholders; and taking power on behalf of their children, whose futures will affect them all. ❑

HORACE

Coalition of Essential Schools
Box 1969, Brown University
Providence, RI 02912

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Providence RI
Permit No. 202